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Sailer, Matthias; Roll, Stephan

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# Three Scenarios for the Qatar Crisis

**Regime Change, Resolution or Cold War in the Gulf**

*Matthias Sailer and Stephan Roll*

**On 5 June 2017 Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and a number of allied states broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar and imposed a partial blockade. Their stated demand was for Qatar to cease its support for "terrorist" groups and its policy of "destabilising" other countries. With Qatar rejecting the charges as baseless, the prospects for resolution appear thin. The most conceivable scenarios are forcible replacement of the Qatari leadership, peaceful resolution between the parties, or consolidation of the rift between two camps in the Gulf. Germany and other European states should avoid taking sides, but should assert three fundamental demands: the conflict parties must respect national sovereignty and the proportionality required by international law, refrain from instrumentalising the fight against terrorism, and prevent the dispute spilling over into other conflicts in the region.**

Political tensions between Qatar and its neighbours Saudi Arabia and UAE have existed since the 1970s, with conflicts initially revolving largely around border disputes. Today it is principally Qatar's foreign policy that draws the ire of its two neighbours. Especially since the advent of the so-called Arab Spring in late 2010, Qatar has placed its weight behind different regional actors and alliances than Saudi Arabia and UAE, in particular the rising Muslim Brotherhood and groups close to it (also through Doha-based broadcaster Al Jazeera). Riyadh and Abu Dhabi regard these actors as security risks. Qatar also expanded relations with neighbouring Iran. This was unacceptable to Saudi Arabia in particular, which feels threatened by Iran's regional policies.

The first major diplomatic crisis occurred in 2014, but was resolved after Qatari concessions; the latest embargo follows on directly from that dispute. While the trigger was a speech by the Qatari emir supposedly praising Iran as an "important regional power", there is good reason to believe that the text as reported was manipulated by means of computer hacking. At a deeper level, the embargo is rooted in accusations that Doha had reneged on its promise of 2014 to align its foreign policy more closely with Saudi and Emirati interests. On June 5, without even issuing an ultimatum, Saudi Arabia closed its land border with Qatar and excluded Qatari craft from Saudi and Emirati airspace and territorial waters. Neighbouring Bahrain

*Matthias Sailer is a Ph.D. Fellow in SWP's Middle East and Africa Division*
*Dr. Stephan Roll is Deputy Head of SWP's Middle East and Africa Division*

also joined the embargo. Qatar must now rely on a narrow Iranian-controlled air and sea corridor.

Concrete demands were not communicated until eighteen days after the embargo began. They include Qatar strongly reducing its diplomatic relations with Iran, declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation and closing Al Jazeera, with monthly reviews to ensure compliance. Qatar officially rejected them as unacceptable on 3 July 2017, in a letter to the Kuwaiti emir who acted as a mediator between the two sides.

Considering these developments, three fundamental scenarios are conceivable, with widely differing likelihoods.

## Scenario 1: Regime Change in Doha

Statements by Saudi lobbyists and articles in Emirati newspapers suggest that leading members of the Saudi and Emirati royal families would like to see the Qatari leadership toppled and replaced. In light of the disproportionality of means applied, it cannot be completely excluded that this is the path Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are in fact pursuing. But such a scenario would be inconceivable without a military escalation or an externally supported palace coup, both of which currently appear unlikely.

Military escalation in the form of a Saudi/Emirati invasion would involve considerable risks on account of the unforeseeable regional consequences. Both Turkey and Iran have underlined their backing for Qatar. In many spheres the objectives of Turkish foreign policy coincide with those of Qatar, and this is reflected in close military cooperation between the two. Turkey maintains a military base in Qatar, and announced an expansion immediately after the blockade began – firmly rejecting Saudi and UAE demands to close the base. Theran's support for Qatar and assistance in maintaining supplies is no surprise given its long-running hegemonic conflict with Riyadh.

Most importantly of all, a military escalation would contradict strategic US interests. Qatar hosts one of the largest US military bases in the Gulf, and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has called on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to avoid escalating the conflict. The post-blockade sale of thirty-six US warplanes to Qatar also indicates that Washington is sticking by its ally. The known unknown here is President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly made extremely critical comments about Qatar; his messaging probably encouraged Saudi Arabia and UAE to act as they have.

Nor is there currently any sign of forced change in the Qatari leadership. Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani may be young, at thirty-seven, and has only been in charge for five years. But closer relations with Iran and support for the Muslim Brotherhood – as the two main reasons for the present conflict – are fundamental policy decisions taken long before his enthronement. The centres of power are controlled by members of the royal family who have supported these policies for many years, potential rivals in the royal family at home or abroad therefore lack a viable institutional power base.

## Scenario 2: Conflict Resolution

Both the United States and Europe are pressing for a rapid end to the conflict. Too great is the danger that the tensions will hamstring the fight against the so-called Islamic State and harm their economies through rising oil and gas prices or disruption of Western business activities in the Gulf. A mutual resolution could involve lifting the embargo in return for the expulsion from Qatar of a number of individuals that Saudi Arabia, UAE and their allies regard as terrorists. Doha-based leaders of the Palestinian Hamas have already left the country. Qatar could conceivably renew its promise to pay greater heed to the interests of the other Gulf monarchies in its foreign policy activities (including the editorial policies of Al Jazeera).

The economic costs to both sides of a prolonged boycott mitigate in favour of this scenario. Apart from the immediate nega-

tive repercussions for the Qatari state budget, the crisis darkens the investment climate across the Gulf monarchies, undermining their reputation as secure and stable destinations. The partial blockade significantly increases the cost of Qatar's imports, but it would also profit if market insecurity causes gas prices to rise. Qatar also holds considerable foreign investments whose yields are likely to cover the costs of the embargo at least in the medium term.

Nevertheless, two crucial factors speak against this scenario. Firstly, any compromise would be associated with significant loss of face for the leaders on both sides. The hard line taken by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would make any peaceful resolution hard to communicate to domestic audiences. For Doha, acquiescing to any of the demands from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would be tantamount to a loss of sovereignty and make Qatar a vassal of its neighbours. At the same time, the history to date suggests that it is highly unlikely that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would be satisfied with limited concessions.

Secondly, the conflict has acquired a very personal dimension. Public statements by certain Saudi and Emirati politicians, and above all a spate of editorials in the state-controlled media in both countries have directly attacked and in some cases insulted the Qatari emir and his father and predecessor Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. In particular the indirect threat of regime change must have angered Doha and lastingly shattered the already difficult relationship. In view of these aspects, a viable long-term resolution must be regarded as unlikely.

## Scenario 3: Cold War in the Gulf

The most likely option is for Qatar to undertake everything in its power to prepare for future military escalation. Even if the conflict can be deescalated in the short term, Qatar can be expected to massively expand its political and military ties with Turkey. Relations with Tehran are also likely to intensify in view of the current reminder of the importance of the Iranian corridor. Shared gas reserves in the Persian Gulf also create a "lock-in effect" for the Qatari-Iranian relationship.

On the other side, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt can be expected to close ranks. The new Saudi crown prince, Mohamad Bin Salman, is said to enjoy a good personal relationship with the crown prince of Abu Dhabi. The planned hand-over of two Red Sea islands from Egypt to Saudi Arabia – over which negotiations began in 2016 – also suggests a further warming in relations between Riyadh and Cairo.

A consolidating rift between camps in the sub-region could have repercussions on conflicts elsewhere, in which the Gulf states are involved directly – militarily – or indirectly by supplying funding and arms. Qatar and its adversaries could be tempted to inflict harm on each other in Syria, Libya, Yemen, the Gaza Strip or the Horn of Africa. Above all, a cemented antagonism would completely paralyse the already weak regional organisations, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League. For the foreseeable future these toothless organisations are unlikely to manage to demonstrate even symbolic unity.

## Conclusions

The third scenario is the most likely. If it comes to pass, it will be difficult to mediate between the parties. The precondition for successful intervention would be intensified and above all coherent efforts by Washington, which maintains security partnerships with all the Gulf monarchies. At the same time Europe's influence should not be underestimated. Ultimately Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have all been weakened by the conflict. And while identifiable camps have emerged, they also contain diverging interests within them. The Qataris will not want to become overdependent on Turkey and Iran, while a close partnership with politically unreliable and economically stricken Egypt will be costly for Saudi Arabia in the medium term. Even

between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi differences exist: the UAE fights the Muslim Brotherhood absolutely dogmatically, while Saudi Arabia has to date been willing to cooperate with associated groups outside its territory.

In the short term mediation by the EU or individual member states – possibly in conjunction with the hitherto neutral Gulf states Kuwait and Oman – could help to defuse the acute crisis. Here there would be important roles for Germany and France especially, which enjoy good relations with all the states involved. But this will do little to resolve the underlying conflict. It is therefore all the more urgent for Germany and its European partners to address clear demands to all the conflict parties, defined by long-term considerations rather than short-term economic interests. It needs to be communicated to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that national sovereignty and the principle of proportionality in international law must always be respected. Both sides should also be called upon to intensify their efforts to eliminate jihadist terrorism, without misusing that fight as a pretext to suppress political opposition. Above all, the parties should be pressed to avoid injecting their strife into other regional conflicts.



**SWP**
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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